

Atlas of Utah

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The Domínguez-Escalante Expedition

A large part of the present state of Utah was made known as a result of a 1776 effort by the Spaniards to open an overland trail from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to the recently founded Spanish missions in Alta California. Recognizing that such a trail would be valuable to Spain for defensive, economic, and political reasons as well as religious, a ten-man expedition set forth on July 29, 1776. It was led by two Franciscan padres, Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez and Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante. Of the remaining eight members of the party, don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco, a retired military engineer, was the most important. He later prepared a map of the regions traversed by the expeditioners and thereby gave the first visual representation of Utah to the world.

Contrary to general belief, the actual leader of the enterprise was Father Domínguez, Father Escalante's ecclesiastical superior. The latter was a partner in the effort, but the junior partner, and the journal of the expedition was a work of joint authorship by the two priests, not by Father Escalante alone.

It used to be the fashion to begin the history of Utah with the 1540 expedition of don García López de Cárdenas, a lieutenant of don Francisco Vázquez de Coronado. Hubert Howe Bancroft, in his *History of Utah* (1889), reported that Cárdenas journeyed northward from the Hopi villages in northeastern Arizona into southeastern Utah where he was finally stopped in his tracks by a great canyon of the Colorado River. Since nowhere in southeastern Utah is there a canyon of the proportions he described, this claim has always been suspect. In 1940 it was demonstrated that Cárdenas had not proceeded north from Hopi, but rather westward, guided by Hopi Indians from waterhole to waterhole, until they reached the south rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona, probably at a point now called Grand View.

With the Cárdenas "discovery" of Utah refuted, historians then suggested that the first Europeans to enter the state were with the Domínguez-Escalante expedition. Even this claim has now been demonstrated as incorrect. A recently discovered journal in the Servicio Histórico Militar in Madrid, Spain, reveals that Juan María Antonio Rivera apparently penetrated into southeastern Utah as far as the Moab area as early as 1765. There are suggestions in documents in the Spanish archives of New Mexico of still other Spaniards in this region at this time and perhaps even earlier. Further research in these archives, and of those in Mexico and Spain, may one day reveal the names of others who were in Utah prior to this date.

After departing Santa Fe and proceeding northwest into present southwestern Colorado, the party headed north in Colorado along the Utah-Colorado border. They entered Utah once in San Juan County on August 16 and camped on the border at a place they called Agua Escondida. Heading northward in Colorado they entered Utah again on September 14 and camped for three

nights in a cottonwood grove on the bank of the Green River some six miles north of Jensen.

They forded the Green on September 16, and then directed their course in a southwest direction to a campsite they called Santa Catarina, in a meadow on the west side of the Duchesne River about a mile above the town of Duchesne. They were impressed with the country they crossed that day and suggested that with the aid of irrigation there was plenty of good farming land and that three Spanish settlements could be established there. From Duchesne to the Strawberry Valley the trail paralleled present U.S. Highway 40, keeping a mile or more to the north of that trace most of the way. Beyond what is now Strawberry Reservoir they crossed a ridge which divided the Colorado River Basin from the Great Basin and descended Diamond Creek to the Spanish Fork River. They followed this stream westward to the mouth of Spanish Fork Canyon and climbed a small hill on the south side, where they got their first view of Utah Valley. They named this beautiful valley La Valle de Nuestra Señora de la Merced de los Tympanocuitzis.

They camped on the shores of Utah Lake at the mouth of the Provo River and were impressed and delighted with the place. They extolled its virtues in their journal and suggested that this "valley is so spacious with such good land and beautiful proportions that in it alone a province like New Mexico can be established and can be maintained there well supplied with every kind of grain and cattle." The Indians seemed receptive to the gospel and the padres solemnly promised them that upon completion of their present assignment they would return within a year to teach the gospel and that they would bring crops and cattle, promising that "if they consented to live as God commands and as the fathers would teach them, everything necessary would be sent by our Captain, who is very grand and rich and whom we call King. For if he saw they wished to become Christians, he would regard them as his children, and he would care for them just as if they already were his people."

It subsequently proved impossible for the Spaniards to return to Utah as promised. Conditions in New Mexico had deteriorated, and missionary efforts along the frontier declined. When they requested missions for Utah they were informed by one cynical administrator that "for purposes of the faith the frontier was already sufficiently spread out." The government had effected a retrenchment policy caused by the lack of money and men and aggravated by the expulsion of the Jesuits from the New World in 1767. Their missions had been taken over by the religious of other orders and there simply were not enough missionaries to occupy missions already established, let alone to extend the mission frontier into new and distant lands. The promise made by Domínguez and Escalante to the Utah Indians was subsequently forgotten—with important ramifications for the future history of Utah. Had the

Spaniards returned, the course of Utah history may well have taken an entirely different perspective. When Brigham Young was seeking a home for his persecuted followers he might have avoided Utah and the Wasatch Front because the best lands would have been settled by Spaniards at missions, pueblos, ranchos, and perhaps a presidio or two. Today the Utah landscape would no doubt be dotted with names with a decided Spanish ring such as Santa Catarina, Santa Ana, San Antonio de Padua, San Nicolás, Dulce Nombre de Jesus, San Andrés, and Señor San José, instead of the purely Mormon names Lehi, Nephi, Manti, and Moroni. Additionally, Utah's history would have been closely associated with that of New Mexico, Texas, and California, instead of with the distant American frontier.

From Utah Valley the Spaniards once again proceeded toward their destination, traveling south and southwest. Along the way they encountered many other peaceful and friendly Indians, all of whom spoke the Ute language. Some of these people sported very long and full beards, which seemed unusual to the Spaniards. (Miera y Pacheco described these on his map as Yutas Barbones, or Bearded Utes.)

The expedition crossed the Sevier River near Mills and then turned to the southwest through the Beaver River Valley. On October 8 an unseasonable snowstorm forced them to stop for three days. The padres at this point decided that it was impractical to continue on to Monterey that season and suggested that the party return to Santa Fe. The civilians grumbled at this and threatened a mutiny. They had signed up in the belief that the opening of a trail to California would enrich them. Because of their opposition, the decision to abandon the goal was postponed for several days. On October 11, however, Father Domínguez informed them that it would be impossible to continue toward California that season. Ever since Utah Valley, the two padres apparently had lost all desire to continue to California. Their missionary zeal rekindled, they preferred to head for home immediately and directly to recruit settlers and missionaries for a return trip to Utah.

By casting lots it was determined to return to Santa Fe. When it was thus decided, everyone accepted it as the will of God and the grumbling apparently ended. They directed their course to the south through Cedar Valley, down Ash Creek, and across the Virgin River, where they soon reached the high tablelands of the canyon of the Colorado River.

For a month they wandered over extremely difficult terrain seeking a crossing. They came up on the Colorado at the mouth of the Paria River on October 26, where Lee's Ferry would be established nearly a century later, but determined that a crossing there was not feasible. On November 7 they finally crossed the great river about thirty miles below the mouth of the San Juan River, three miles north of the Utah-Arizona line. This "Crossing of the Fathers" was at one time one of the

most cherished historical sites in Utah, for the steps they carved out of Padre Creek Canyon had been located and preserved. Unfortunately, they are now covered by 500 feet of water of Lake Powell.

Once across the Colorado they directed their course to the south and southeast to the villages of the Cosninas, and then to the Hopi towns. From here they proceeded to Zuni and then on to Acoma, Laguna, Alamo, Isleta, Albuquerque, Sandia, and Santo Domingo. On January 2, 1777, they arrived in Santa Fe and their long journey of almost 2,000 miles was completed. The next day, January 3, Father Domínguez reported to the governor and submitted the expedition diary.

Demand for overland communication between New Mexico and California had been the stimulus for the expedition. An overland route was thought necessary as a means of protecting California from a supposed Russian advance down the West Coast and as an economic saving in transportation. Insofar as the original intentions were concerned therefore, the expedition was a complete failure. Still, these men were the first Europeans to explore a large portion of the interior of North America, and the expedition is significant and important to the history of Utah because of the remarkable journal the two Franciscans kept while on their expedition. This journal, which has been published in English at least four times, provides the first written description of Utah's geography, flora, fauna, and earliest inhabitants. It is an important starting place for any student of Utah history, geography, anthropology, botany, or zoology.

For reference, see Bibliography, numbers 23, 31, 41, 49, 55, 146, 404

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Utah Atlas